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ABSTRACT

Despite a profusion of mentoring publications, much information on the subject is opinion-based, retrospective, and reflective. In examining mentoring for career advancement, researchers have focused largely on proteges' experience. This study examined mentoring as a mechanism for career advancement, focusing on the mentor's perspective and seeking to identify what mentors did, why they did it, and how they saw the process before, during, and after the experience. The study also tries to identify whether special problems or issues arose as a result of cross-race and cross-gender mentoring. Using qualitative research methods, including indepth interviews and diaries, 25 subjects were chosen from three kinds of organizations--higher education, industry, and government. Only 15 actually participated. Mentors gathered at a symposium to discuss the role of mentoring in their careers, to explain their perceptions of the process, and to reflect on issues, problems, and other factors. After each mentor had selected a person in his/her organization with advancement potential and monitored this mentor-protege relationship for 3 months, a second symposium was arranged during which both groups shared their experiences. Two major findings emerged. There was enthusiastic agreement concerning the importance of mentoring. Mentors fell into two groups: "true believers," who used mentoring as an organizational tool; and "mystics," who felt mentoring should be a veiled process for a select few. Most mentors studied fit the latter category, which raises questions about mentoring relationships and their effects on career advancement. Results also raised serious questions concerning the value of mentoring for women and minorities. (30 references) (MLH)

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MENTORING FOR ADMINISTRATIVE ADVANCEMENT:

A STUDY OF WHAT MENTORS DO AND THINK

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MENTORING FOR ADMINISTRATIVE ADVANCEMENT:

A STUDY OF WHAT MENTORS DO AND THINK

It is said that, "Everyone who makes it has a mentor," (Collins and Scott, 1978), that nearly all routes to the executive suite require mentoring (Jennings, 1971), and that those who are mentored do better than those who are not (Queralt, 1981; Roche, 1979). Mentoring is a hot topic, one that has been widely written about in the popular and professional literature. Despite the large number of books and articles on the subject, much of what we know about mentoring is opinion-based, retrospective and reflective. Little of what has been written is research-based.

Research on mentoring has considered the place of mentoring in the life cycle of the adult (Levenson, 1978; Sheehy, 1976; Burton, 1977; Erikson, 1950; Vallant, 1977), and the perceived benefits of mentoring for the protege and the mentor (Levinson, 1978; Collins, 1983; Fenske, 1986; Kouba, 1984; Moore, 1982). In examining mentoring for career advancement, researchers have focused largely on proteges and the experience as perceived by them (Collins, 1983; Villani, 1983; Massarian, 1980; Boulton, 1980). With the exception of Kram (1985), no one has looked at mentoring from the perspective of the mentor or from within the relationship to learn what mentors do as they mentor.

If mentoring is as important as it is presumed to be for individuals and organizations, examining it systematically from within is a necessary next step. There is a need to understand

mentoring from the perspective of both the mentor and the protege and to identify the mechanics and dynamics of the process.

The study sought to examine mentoring as a mechanism for career advancement. It looked at mentoring primarily, although not exclusively, from the perspective of the mentor and sought to identify what mentors did in the process of mentoring, why they did it, and how they saw the process before, during and after the experience. Futhermore, the study attempted to identify whether or not special problems or issues arose as a result of cross-race/cross-gender mentoring.

METHODOLOGY

PROCEDURES

As a relatively unexplored topic, a research methodology which allows the process and research questions to emerge was necessary. Therefore, a qualitative approach was selected. A combination of qualitative methods was used, including in-depth interviews and diaries.

To fully understand mentoring as it occurs, it was important to examine it in a variety of organizational contexts. Consequently, the study included subjects from three kinds of organizations: higher education, business and industry and government.

A modified Delphi technique was used to identify chief executives and senior-level administrators from each of the three types of organizations. For economic reasons, nominations were sought within the southeastern region and were restricted to a

total of twenty-five subjects. The subjects were nominated for their ability to recognize and develop talent. Of those nominated, twenty agreed to participate. They were fully informed of the nature of the project and the commitments involved. Nevertheless, for a variety of unforseen reasons, five were unable to honor the commitment and dropped out during the initial phase of the program. The remaining fifteen became the primary subjects (mentors).

Mentors were brought together in a symposium to identify the role mentoring had played in their careers, to explain the mentoring process as they saw it, and to reflect on issues, problems and factors in the mentoring process. They were asked to choose a person in their organization whom they perceived had the potential to advance, to self-consciously mentor (i.e., reflecting on the process as they went about it), for at least three months.

Following this experience, the primary subjects (mentors) and the secondary subjects (proteges) were brought together in a second symposium to share what had happened, to identify the problems and concerns which had emerged during the mentoring experience, and to reflect on the process.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected throughout the process. The proceedings of the two symposia were audio-taped and transcribed. Mentors and proteges submitted diaries and summary reports about their experiences. Individual, in-depth interviews were conducted with

mentors and proteges.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed individually in terms of the research questions. All of the data was reviewed by each of the three researchers working independently. Collectively, they identified the patterns and questions they saw emerge from the data, using evidence from the data to support their contentions. Through the process of joint analysis and defense, the researchers accepted those findings about which they achieved consensus.

This paper presents the findings of the primary issues of the study, what mentors do and think as they go about the process of mentoring. An earlier paper (Mertz, Welch and Henderson, 1988) discussed the findings of a secondary issue which emerged from the study, how proteges are selected.

FINDINGS

Two major findings emerged from the study. The first concerned how mentors saw mentoring and, therefore, mentored; and the second concerned their response to cross-race/cross-gender mentoring.

Mentoring

There was general, even overwhelming agreement about the importance of mentoring. Each mentor indicated that mentoring had been an important, even critical part of his/her own career advancement. Mentors willingly discussed mentoring as a concept

for themselves and others, but when the discussions turned to process, they tended to respond in one of two ways.

In the first category were what might be called "true believers," those who accepted mentoring and saw it as an organizational tool. In the second category were what might be called "mystics," those who acknowledged its importance, but thought it should be a veiled process for a select few, one which should not be incorporated into the formal structure of an organization. Allegiance to one or the other category had implications for whether or not the mentor chose a protege, who was selected, what kinds of experiences were provided, and how vague or specific the mentor was in describing the mentoring experience.

True Believers Eleven mentors selected proteges and proceeded to develop a relationship aimed at enhancing the advancement potential of the protege. These mentors set aside time from their busy schedules to meet with the proteges and kept records of their meetings. As a group, they took their mentoring responsibilities seriously, thought about what they should or should not do, and planned activities to test and to stretch the proteges. They made their proteges privy to valuable information about the organization and how it worked they might not otherwise have had, and in large and small ways, furthered the proteges' career.

"I've been meeting with her weekly. I helped her formulate goals and formally evaluated their realization." "I created a challenge for her to see how she'd manage. I wanted her to be

the best." "I expect her to advance. I couldn't afford to invest the time if not. I'm grooming her to be head of _____." "I want to know how he thinks, how he performs when prepared and unprepared, how he treats his people, whether he thinks as I do and, if not, how he convinces me."

A protege contributed, "He's constantly pushing me to think about future positions. He opened my mind to lots of possibilities. He keeps me in touch with opportunities and lays out experiences he's willing to provide."

For the proteges, the relationship reinforced their sense of self-worth and underscored their career potential. "He made it clear to me." "He validated my presence to others." "He deliberately opened relationships for me, gave me opportunities to meet people and said nice things about me behind my back." "He gave me additional responsibilities." "He campaigned for me, supported me, lobbied for me, and got me an interview." "He tells me things I can't tell." "It was happening, everything I thought of as a mentoring relationship." "I think it will boost my career. It's bankable stuff."

While the relationships looked similar, they differed markedly from one another and were idiosyncratic in nature. They varied in terms of situation, conditions and personalities of the participants.

<u>The Mystics</u> The second group were termed "mystics" because of their desire to keep the process secret, ill-defined and concealed. They believed that such relationships "happened" and needed to remain unspecified to be successful.

They agreed that the mentoring you acknowledged (made public) occurred at lower levels of the organization (what the authors would describe as good supervision). However, when it came to mentoring for acceptance into the inner circle, they believed the process was best left undefined and known only to those directly involved.

Despite having been mentored in their own careers, acknowledging its importance in "getting ahead," and agreeing to choose and consciously mentor a protege for advancement, when it came right down to it, these mentors (mystics) could not bring themselves to choose a protege.

Each put forward a good reason for not choosing a protege. They argued, "it will cause dissension if I single one person out." "Because _____ is publically owned, it is just not as conducive for mentoring as grooming for a family-owned business." "The psychological effect of mentoring can create non-constructive dynamics no matter how good the mentee." "You aren't doing them a favor if you choose them out and they appear to be in a preferred position." "If I singled one out, it would usurp the authority of those under me."

While resisting mentoring for career advancement, they argued vigorously for defining mentoring only as a means of career development, not career advancement. "Why does it always have to be career advancement..." "Why can't you just use it to better people's skills." "Yes, I've had these who come in expecting me to promote them. They don't know the rules and their pushiness bothers me." "A good part of mentoring involves

helping a protege identify strengths and weaknesses, but not committing yourself to advancement. At least that's what I'm comfortable with."

The foregoing was part of a dialogue among mentors. Responding to this position, "true believers" argued, "Well, I guess I'm confused about the whole thing. I thought mentoring was about career advancement. (Pause.) At least, that's how I chose my protege." "Well, I guess it's different for_____ because we're supposed to be thinking about who's coming after us and looking for good people."

The foregoing conversation clearly demonstrates the difference in perspective between mystics and true believers about what mentoring is and how people advance in organizations. The final proof of this is that amongst the true believers, five of the ten proteges have been promoted. In three more cases, the mentor is actively working for the promotion of the protege, both within and outside of the organization.

Cross Race/Cross Gender Mentoring:

The ten mentor-protege relationships that were formed as a part of the project involved a variety of configurations of gender and race. All but two of the mentors were white males. There were four cross-race mentor-protege pairs and six same-race mentor pairs. There were seven cross-gender pairs and three same-gender pairs. Two of the pairings were both cross-race and cross-gender. As was noted earlier, two of the mentors were females. One of these was black and the other white.

As a group, mentors categorically denied there were any

problems or special concerns related to cross race and/or cross-gender mentoring. They insisted that since competence would be the sole criterion for selection of proteges, there would be no problems. They envisioned no problems related to socialization before the fact and denied that there had been any after the fact.

This was the public stance of all mentors, but appeared to represent the beliefs of the male mentors, not the female mentors. While publically they appeared to agree with their male counterparts, in private discussions, from the beginning, they acknowledged that in reality there were special issues and problems involved in cross-race and cross-gender mentoring. They clearly identified the problems they had encountered in such relationships and those they had seen in similar relationships. "Women are in the spotlight, being singled out does cause problems, does cost...but it's worth it. "You have to be very genteel, our little star. A woman must prove overcompetence all the time." "There are only a half dozen women and minority stars in the community. We are in a special container, singled out...special." "They didn't value my decisions. I almost had to fight for everything. Whatever any one else didn't want to do, I did."

Despite the vigor with which male mentors maintained that cross-race/cross-gender mentoring did not incur special problems, evidence from their diaries and interviews suggests that there were problems related to the gender and race of the protege. "Basic discrimination exists. Many don't see women

and minorities as equals." "There is prejudice about women and minorities and it rears its ugly head. There are old patterns (of belief) that women and minorities can't work with everyone." "They're more aspiring than capable. A few are superstars, but for the majority the educational, developmental level is way below." "If I had a woman VP, it would be a problem. Men who work for me drop things off at my home. What will their wives say (if I have a female excutive)?"

Only one of the male mentors included the protege in business-related socializing (drinks after work). Three more occasionally had lunch with their proteges, but in one of the two cases, it was only if there were other people present. Indeed we were told, "the ground rules (are) no social interaction alone." One mentor poignantly alluded to the problems in a cross-race/cross-gender relationship:

> I've come away from this mentoring relationship believing that I've gained a friend. (We) worked well together. I have a high regard for her and a high regard for her ability. I'd like to get to know her and her husband, and even her children. This is a family that you'd really like to get warm and fuzzy about. I don't know if that will ever happen.

It was clear from his tone and manner that race and gender were barriers to the development of this relationship, despite the desire to have it develop. The apparent conflict between the male mentors' avowals and the evidence which emerged seems to suggest that they were not consciously aware that problems existed.

If the differences between male and female mentors were marked, the differences between mentors and proteges were even more pronounced. There were two males and eight female proteges,

including five blacks and five whites. To a person, regardless of race or gender, proteges acknowledged the existence of problems involved in cross-race/cross-gender mentoring and identified a wealth of them in their relationship and in those they saw around them.

"In their minds you never reach equality because the white male doesn't ever, at gut, get the feeling we ever can be equal." "White males have the edge in their own minds. You never reach a level of superiority or achieve parity, if you are black or female." "Every day you have to prove you are competent. Regardless of the verbal message that you are alright, the reality is you're not. You can never stop proving yourself even for a minute." "Whatever you are doing you are being seen by people as exceptional or different." "People choose to perceive that there are other reasons I got thrown into the game...." "Bias...it's so ingrained. It's not overt racism or sexism. We simply don't exist." "You have to disarm all the stereotypes. Guys can get away with more out-of-the-work-setting experiences without the fear of mixed messages. (Amongst) guys there is a little bit of something that clicks on. Guys like me on the way up have access on different turf."

While mentors were largely unconscious of the issues and problems in cross-race/cross-gender mentoring, proteges were painfully aware of these problems. They willingly identified them privately and publically in protege group discussions. However, to the best of our knowledge, proteges chose not to deal with these concerns in their relationships or when mentors and

proteges were together as a group.

These findings, that there is a discrepancy between protege and mentor perceptions and an unwillingness of proteges to address the issue, suggest the undisturbed perpetuation of male mentor perceptions that there are no special problems or issues associated with cross-race and/or cross-gender mentoring. This failure to recognize or deal with the problems of cross-race and cross-gender mentoring has serious implications for the development of the mentoring relationship. It may well mean that in cross-race/cross-gender relationships, women and minorities may be denied the full benefits of mentoring.

CONCLUSIONS

This study of mentoring for administrative advancement allowed for a rare glimpse into the dynamics of mentoring relationships as they were occurring. As this is one of very few studies of mentoring from within the relationship, it was of necessity open-ended rather than controlled, and sought to identify the questions to be verified in future research. Thus, there is no claim on the part of the researchers that the findings presented represent the reality of mentoring relationships or what all mentors do and think. It may be that the relationships studied were idiosyncratic; or that the pairings were contrived rather than naturally occurring which may have affected the relationship. We recognize these possibilities. If, however, the relationships studied bear any resemblance to what occurs out in "the real world," the findings

of the study provide important information about these relationships and their effect on career advancement.

Mentors appear to have a strong disposition to keep the process of mentoring mystical rather than expose it to the analytical "light of day." It raises questions about the reasons underlying this disposition. What is served by keeping it mystical? What is the effect on the organization? Does it represent a failure to consciously think about the process or a desire to avoid revealing the criteria by which the gatekeeping fuction operates in organizations?

Closely linked to the dispositon to keep the process mysterious was the mentors' public stance about the purposes of mentoring. Although mentors affirmed the importance of mentoring in their own career advancement, when it came to developing others, they took opposing positions. One group saw it as an organizational tool for the identification and nurturing of talent to move up to the highest levels of the organization (career advancement). The other group saw it as a vehicle for the development of individuals (good supervision) within their defined role and position (career development), having little or nothing to do with their future advancement.

Is this a true representation of the beliefs of this latter group or is it a way to avoid publically revealing how people are advanced into high-level positions? Is this an unconscious way of operating or a covert attempt to keep certain people out? Does this stance allow for reducing any obligation for facilitating the advancement of women and minorities to high-level positions?

Whatever the answers to these questions, the implications of this stance keep mentors focused on replicating self for high-level positions rather than focusing on what the organization needs in the way of top-level people.

The ramifications of these questions are considerable when viewed in light of current attempts to institutionalize and formalize mentoring and conventional wisdom that mentoring is the key to the top. If the attitudes and perceptions of those at the top are those of the mystics, the prospects for many of those who seek admission to the top are discouraging, despite their potential and qualifications.

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